



Mapping the Epistemic Landscape of Late Joseon

Jisik-gwa Joseon: Sahoe-reul ilgneunda (Knowledge in Joseon: An Interpretation of Joseon Society). By Jae Kyo Jin. Seoul: Sungkyunkwan University Press, 2025. 824 pages. ISBN: 9791155506561.

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Why was late Joseon unable to respond more effectively to the shifting configuration of the global order at the threshold of modernity? Such is the deceptively simple question with which Jae Kyo Jin opens his monumental new monograph. Rather than rehearse a teleology of success or failure, Jin reconstructs the historical processes by which knowledge was constituted and reconstituted through situated textual practices. Jin pays close attention to how information and experiential learning—forged in warfare and diplomatic travel—were reorganized through notebooks (*pilgi* 筆記), encyclopedic compilations (*yuseo* 類書), and embassy travel records (*sahaengnok* 使行錄).

Knowledge, in Jin's telling, is no static repository. It is a historically mediated configuration, shaped by interpretive conventions, textual technologies, and the material conditions of circulation. Drawing on more than three decades of work on Sinitic textual culture in Korea, the author places these materials in a framework that puts intellectual history in conversation with the sociology of knowledge. The result is a study that shows how epistemic authority emerged from the mundane but consequential work of textual selection, organization, and transmission. This volume's scholarly ambition has not gone unnoticed: it received a Sejong Book Award from Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2025.

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Jin organizes his inquiry around three analytical axes—experience and observation, books and reading practices, and the social spaces of intellectual exchange. This book traces how experiential knowledge from diplomatic travel became textualized, then repeatedly reorganized through interpretation, classification, and editorial intervention. In doing so, he does not stop with the literati elite. By bringing into view interpreters (*yeokgwan* 譯官, the Joseon state's licensed foreign-language specialists), physicians, technical specialists, and other middle-status actors, Jin demonstrates that scholarly knowledge was at once constrained by hierarchical norms and transmitted through partially autonomous channels. This is intellectual history refracted through the sociology of knowledge, a nuanced account of how epistemic authority, textual practice, and social stratification coconstituted one another.

The volume comprises six parts and fourteen chapters. Generally, the book's first half examines the spatial and material conditions that shaped the production and transmission of learned knowledge; the second half turns to the agents and networks through which information moved. Parts I and II explore how warfare, diplomatic travel, private book collecting, and evolving reading practices generated knowledge. Parts III and IV show how specific genres—*chagi* 筭記-style miscellaneous writings, encyclopedic compilations, biographical catalogues—reconfigured classificatory practices and reshaped epistemic categories. Parts V and VI shift to intermediary intellectuals, literary gatherings, and social networks, where the circulation of learning began to approximate something like a public sphere. The overall architecture—spaces of constitution, textual technologies, social actors—allows Jin to offer a genuinely synthetic reconstruction of late Joseon's epistemic environment.

To summarize each part: Part I argues that war and diplomatic travel catalyzed knowledge dissemination. The Imjin War (1592) brought Joseon Korea, Ming China, and Hideyoshi Japan into direct contact, accelerating the movement of both people and texts. The adoption of the Ming general Qi Jiguang's 戚繼光 (1528–1588) *Jixiao xinshu* 紀效新書 in Yu Seongryong's 柳成龍 (1542–1607, a state councillor-in-chief of Joseon) military reforms

illustrates how imported knowledge could be appropriated for state purposes. After that war, embassies to Beijing and Japan—*yeonhaeng* 燕行 and *tongsinsa* 通信使 missions—became institutionalized channels for acquiring books, objects, and information, with Beijing's Liulichang 琉璃廠 market emerging as a nodal point in the East Asian book trade.

Travel records, the author insists, should not be read as mere chronicles. They are editorially structured texts in which inherited documentary knowledge is refracted through personal observation. Yi Giji's 李器之 (1696–1767) *Iram yeongi* 一庵燕記 and Seong Daejung's 成大中 (1732–1809) *Ilbonnok* 日本錄 show that even when directed at similar objects of inquiry, the selection, arrangement, and interpretation of information varied with the author's intellectual priorities. And because intermediaries such as *yeokgwan* and *jesulgwan* 製述官 (mission scholars tasked with diplomatic poetry and memorials) exchanged specialized expertise in medicine and painting through written conversations and poetic correspondence (*pildam changhwa* 筆談唱和), diplomatic travel was not a passive conduit but an active site of scholarly communication. Mobile experience, refracted through reading and writing, generated new epistemic configurations.

In Part II, Jin turns to book collecting, reading environments, and material instruments. The bibliophiles of the Pungsan Hong lineage—Hong Seokju 洪奭周 (1774–1842), Hong Gilju 洪吉周 (1786–1841), and Hong Hanju 洪翰周 (1798–1868)—offer an instructive case. Reading was not an individual pursuit but the foundation of a lineage-based scholarly network. Texts such as the *Hongssi dokseorok* 洪氏讀書錄 and *Hakgang sanpil* 鶴岡散筆 reveal that the movement from collecting to sustained reading to annotation and notebook writing was central to intellectual practice. The consolidation of learning depended less on how much one read than on access to textual resources and established habits of excerpting, annotating, and reorganizing.

The diffusion of eyeglasses is an even more unexpected example of how material infrastructure transformed scholarship. Eyeglasses extended reading time and enabled more precise scrutiny. Introduced through diplomatic travel, they became cheaper and more widely available,

facilitating rereading, collation, and more intensive interpretive labor. Material culture did not merely accompany learned activity; it shaped its very possibilities. Scholarly production in late Joseon cannot be understood by reference to texts and ideas alone. It also requires attention to the media and material environment that enabled new reading practices.

The author analyzes the emergence of *chagi* 箭記 and *chagi*-style notebook writing as a distinctive textual practice in Part III. *Chagi*-style composition excerpted, rearranged, and rearticulated materials encountered in reading, building on precedents such as the Song scholar Hong Mai's 洪邁 (1123–1202) *Rongzhai suibi* 容齋隨筆 and the Qing scholar Gu Yanwu's 顧炎武 (1613–1682) *Rizhi lu* 日知錄. But in the hands of Yi Sugwang 李睟光 (1563–1628)'s *Jibong yuseol* 芝峯類說, Yu Hyeongwon 柳馨遠 (1622–1673)'s *Bangye surok* 礪溪隨錄, and Yi Ik 李穡 (1681–1763)'s *Seongho saseol* 星湖僊說, the practice signaled a shift away from classical exegesis of Neo-Confucians and toward the accumulation, organization, and comparison of empirical materials as intellectually meaningful in their own right. The incorporation of observations about material culture—tobacco, for instance—into learned writing marked an expansion of what counted as a legitimate object of inquiry.

Hong Hanju's *Jisu yeompil* 智水拈筆 exemplifies how *chagi*-style practices worked in practice. The reading culture of the Pungsan Hong lineage combined textual criticism with evidential reasoning. Through comparative examination of diverse sources, the reorganization of materials became a mode of intellectual practice. Reading practices, classificatory strategies, and editorial intervention were mutually constitutive; the organization of textual knowledge became an object of scholarly reflection.

Part IV examines transformations in classificatory organization through encyclopedic compilations (*yuseo*) and biographical compilations (*inmulji* 人物志). *Yuseo* were compendious works that excerpted from preexisting texts and reorganized them under thematic rubrics—instruments for retrieval and practical application. Hong Manseon's 洪萬選 (1643–1715) *Sallim gyeongje* 山林經濟 and Yi Gyugyeong's 李圭景 (1788–1856) *Oju yeonmun jangjeon sango* 五洲衍文長箋散稿 exemplify efforts to systematize

diverse domains through evidential methods. These were not mere compilations but attempts to reconfigure relationships among heterogeneous fields of knowledge through new principles of textual ordering.

Biographical compilations reconstructed individual intellectual profiles and actions by synthesizing multiple sources. Particularly striking is how these works departed from convention by arranging a wide range of human types within a shared classificatory frame. The inclusion of morally ambiguous or socially marginal figures—the cunning, the criminal—suggests that epistemic categories were not confined within Neo-Confucian moral hierarchy but increasingly sought to register the diversity of lived social reality. Such classificatory practices transformed information about persons into discrete units of knowledge, broadening historical understanding and social perception alike.

Part V turns to intermediary social groups—including interpreters, physicians, *seoel* 庶孽 (elite illegitimates), painters, and others—as new agents of scholarly formation. These figures actively collected books and cultivated intellectual relations with Chinese and Japanese literati on the basis of linguistic competence and practical expertise. Yi Sangjeok 李尙迪 (1804–1865) and Jeong Duwon 鄭斗源 (1581–?) did not merely transmit foreign information, they produced, interpreted, and mediated knowledge. Interpreters, in particular, contributed to the circulation of practical learning through written conversations, translation, and book exchange, introducing incremental shifts into an epistemic configuration long dominated by the *sadaebu* 士大夫 (scholar-official elite).

These activities also broadened the scope of intellectual practice by bringing technical expertise into sustained interaction with literati learning. As specialized competence in medicine, calendrical science, foreign languages, and painting intersected with established scholarship, the range of intellectual agents diversified. The epistemic landscape of late Joseon was becoming more differentiated—more complex than any account that relies on status hierarchy alone can capture.

Part VI emphasizes that the accumulation of learning extended beyond individual reading into shared social spaces, opening the possibility of

discourse analogous to a public sphere. *Seowon* 書院 (private academies) and lecture gatherings became sites for collective reading, discussion, and evaluation. The scholarly activities of the brothers Jeong Yakyong 丁若鏞 (1762–1836) and Jeong Yakjong 丁若鍾 (1760–1801) are representative. In these settings, the interplay of reading and debate subjected textual interpretations to critical assessment, and particular positions could acquire scholarly authority.

Matteo Ricci's (1552–1610) *Jiaoyoulun* 交友論 is of particular significance. Its proposition that “a friend is a second self” articulated a relational ethic that invited reconsideration of social bonds structured primarily by patrilineal hierarchy and inherited status. The poetic societies (*sisa* 詩社) of Bak Jiwon 朴趾源 (1737–1805) similarly represented efforts to cultivate intellectual exchange beyond lineage and rank. Yet horizontal networks did not displace vertical structures of authority. The epistemic landscape of late Joseon contained latent possibilities for transformation, but those possibilities unfolded only in limited ways within enduring institutional frameworks.

All of this raises a larger question: how did knowledge function within structures of authority? Jin's answer is that of Michel Foucault (1926–1984). For Jin, as for Foucault, knowledge is inseparable from power—what Foucault called the power-knowledge nexus. Knowledge is never neutral; it emerges from and is constrained by social hierarchy and material conditions. Late Joseon was no exception. Jin thus identifies epistemic hierarchy as the key analytical category for understanding its intellectual order. The *sadaebu* reproduced the prevailing social hierarchy by directing the production, classification, and circulation of learning. Newly introduced experiences and forms of knowledge were rearticulated within preexisting normative and discursive frameworks.

Diplomatic travel, reading practices, notebook writing, encyclopedic compilation, and the activities of intermediary groups all revealed the emergence of alternative modes of scholarly formation. But the combined constraints of status hierarchy, linguistic norms, and factional politics limited the channels through which learning could circulate. The volume's

central contribution is to locate the limitations of late Joseon not in any poverty of ideas, but in the structural conditions that sustained and reproduced an epistemic hierarchy of knowledge itself.

This structural perspective helps explain why intellectual developments in late Joseon did not coalesce into horizontal networks comparable to the salon culture and the *Encyclopédie* in Enlightenment Europe, or to the translation communities of *rangaku* 蘭學 in Tokugawa Japan. Spaces of literary sociability—poetic societies included—facilitated certain forms of exchange, but they did not evolve into institutionalized publics capable of sustaining cumulative debate and ongoing knowledge production. The problem was not the absence of new knowledge. It was the limited development of communicative infrastructures through which learning could be shared and expanded.

The material conditions of diffusion were equally consequential. In 18th-century Europe, an expanding print market enabled relatively wide transmission of texts and new forms of intellectual exchange. In late Joseon, access to textual resources remained constrained by a scholarly system embedded in status hierarchy; publication and dissemination operated within comparatively limited institutional and commercial frameworks. Western learning—Ricci's writings included—was introduced, but existing educational institutions and scholarly traditions did not undergo reconfiguration. Newly transmitted forms of knowledge did not circulate broadly enough to reshape the prevailing discursive order. Late Joseon possessed rich textual resources and accumulated learning, yet lacked the institutional means to convert intellectual accumulation into structural transformation.

That said, Jin resists a reductive verdict. The scholarly institutions and social order of Joseon sustained political continuity for more than five centuries—a functional rationality that should not be dismissed. But the same institutional configurations that enabled long-term stability could also operate as constraints when faced with the pressures of adaptation in an increasingly volatile international environment. Repeated warfare produced cumulative social and material exhaustion, diminishing the capacity for

sustained institutional experimentation and reform. Preserving existing structures was, under the circumstances, a comparatively rational course of action. The epistemic configuration of late Joseon is better understood not as stagnation, but as a historically contingent formation shaped by the tension between continuity and the emergence of new forms of change.

What makes this volume significant is that it expands intellectual history beyond the level of ideas to encompass the social and material conditions of knowledge constitution. Through meticulous analysis of diverse textual forms—notebooks, encyclopedic compilations, biographical compendia—the author traces how information was reorganized and transmitted, while treating the social conditions of scholarly activity as an object of inquiry in their own right. By situating Joseon intellectual practices within a shared Sinitic textual environment, the study places Korean intellectual history at the intersection of East Asian intellectual history and emerging approaches to world intellectual history.

The volume does have its limits. It assigns comparatively greater explanatory weight to parallels with Enlightenment Europe—salon culture and the *Encyclopédie*—while leaving somewhat underdeveloped a fully symmetrical analysis of divergent trajectories within East Asia itself. A more sustained juxtaposition of Joseon's epistemic environment with, say, the classificatory regimes of Qing evidential scholarship (*kaozhengxue* 考證學) or the translation-centered knowledge networks of Japanese *rangaku* might have brought into sharper relief the conditions under which distinct epistemic formations took shape within a shared Confucian civilizational sphere. Such an expanded comparative horizon would have permitted an even more precise articulation of late Joseon's historical specificity.

Another issue is the book's tendency to run the word "knowledge" (*jisik* 知識) and the "information" (*jeongbo* 情報) together, leaving their analytical distinction insufficiently specified. A working distinction might help: call "information" raw, unprocessed data acquired through experience or report (say, the observation that tobacco had become widely consumed in China); call "knowledge" information that has been selected, organized, validated, and integrated into a broader interpretive framework (say, the classification

of tobacco under ‘material goods’ within a *yuseo* and its evaluation according to Neo-Confucian norms of moderation). The book’s rich empirical material would have benefited from a more consistent application of such a distinction, which would probably sharpen its account of how mere information became socially recognized knowledge.

These reservations aside, the volume is a major scholarly achievement. Its systematic reconstruction of how knowledge was produced, classified, and circulated in late Joseon—grounded in meticulous textual analysis—stands as a model of its kind. By moving beyond the reductive binary of stagnation versus development, Jin invites us to understand Joseon intellectual history in relation to the social and institutional matrices within which knowledge was constituted. The study offers a panoramic perspective on the epistemic landscape of late Joseon and serves as an indispensable reference for anyone reassessing the historiography of knowledge in East Asia. For readers interested in the structural dynamics and historical trajectories of knowledge in late Joseon, this volume is essential reading.